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A proposal

Countering the decline in counterintelligence

By Jim Patten
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SEVERAL RECENT news headlines seem to indicate that there are some major problems within the United States intelligence community. We have read about a former FBI agent on trial for espionage; another FBI man sentenced to prison for criminal activities; three CIA officers charged with espionage, one of whom escaped his surveillance and is probably in Moscow today; the defection and re-defection of the supposed number five man in KGB.

What does all this mean? These recent developments represent two contradictory but interrelated events from the past. First, the problems that resulted from the Congressional investigations of American intelligence in the mid-1970s have now become apparent. And second, these problems have begun to be addressed in a quiet way by the Reagan administration.

While the above cases and others certainly point to some human failings, these same failings cannot be ignored when they affect the individual and collective security of all Americans. Everyone should take notice and seek some answers to a few perplexing questions. What has happened to our counterintelligence capability that is so vital to American security interests? If we can no longer guarantee that reliability and loyalty of our own agents, how can we adequately assess the motives of intelligence service hostile to our best interests? Are there solutions to the problems posed by these and other questions?

Most people are aware that every country has spies, intelligence officers. Fewer are aware that countries have counterspies, counterintelligence officers. Intelligence officers generally are responsible for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information and knowledge. This in-

formation and knowledge allows policy makers to formulate plans of action. Intelligence officials are truly every country's first line of defense. Their actions can prevent an assassination, thwart would-be terrorists, and even prevent a dangerous situation from escalating to a war between nations.

The American counterintelligence officer's task is doubly important. He must prevent foreign intelligence services from succeeding in their missions and just as importantly, guarantee that our own intelligence personnel are loyal to their duties in their service to our country. These tasks have grown more and more difficult in recent years. The congressional investigations of our intelligence services that came in the wake of our involvement in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal unfairly jeopardized our own internal and external security. This could not have been the intended effect. Even though the sometimes public hearings produced sensational headlines regarding abuses conducted by the American intelligence community, these abuses were few and far between and, for the most part, already corrected through internal mechanics within the intelligence services themselves.

As a result of these investigations, overly restrictive legislation served to hamper counterintelligence investigations. Lack of appropriations and resultant manpower cutbacks further eroded the morale of our men and women in intelligence and particularly those assigned to counterintelligence duties. Counterintelligence capability was virtually dismantled in both our civilian and military agencies. This is no exaggeration. In the early days of the Reagan presidency, President Reagan could not travel to certain American cities because the Secret Service could not assure his safety.

Secret Service was not receiving the intelligence that is essential for evaluating potential threats against the president.

At one time there was one counterintelligence officer for every Soviet intelligence officer operating within the United States. Today that ratio is about 1 to 5. Increased manpower will help, but it will take a long time to replace the years of experience gained by those counterintelligence officers who lost their jobs. Better screening procedures for new personnel, the use of the polygraph and more frequent reinvestigation of all current personnel will also help. The volume of classified information must be reduced by restricting the number of people who have the power to classify. Actual access to classified information must be strictly limited to those with a need-to-know. Contractors in the public sector who work on classified US government programs must also be made more accountable. They too must upgrade their own internal security programs.

However, nothing can be accomplished without the full support of the American public. We must first educate ourselves to the challenges that face American intelligence today, even though the dangers of terrorism, assassination, espionage, and subversion may never directly affect us all. Armed with this knowledge, we must demand that our elected officials in the congress pass appropriate legislation so as to make it possible for our intelligence officers to more easily accomplish their missions. Together we can succeed in preserving the freedom that every American so dearly cherishes.

The writer served in counterintelligence with the U.S. Army during the Vietnam years, and is a current member of the Association of Former Intelligence officers.